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SERMON CCXIV.

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THE ONE THING NEEDFUL.

EPHESIANS ii. 1. *You hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins.*

WHEN we address dying men on the subject of that dissolution, which is the inevitable lot of all, they fully comprehend our meaning. The destruction of natural life is every day before their eyes; and however insensible they may be to their own constant liability to the stroke of the destroyer, and their consequent endless happiness or misery, yet arguments are needless to convince them that what has happened to the generations that have passed away, will happen in turn to them. Sooner or later, the inevitable doom involved in the sentence, "Dust thou art and unto dust thou must return," they know will be theirs. But the case is far different when we speak to them of that spiritual death which alienates the soul from God, precludes his favor, and if not risen from in the present state of existence, must assuredly banish them forever from his presence. Beings so bustling and active, so full of enterprise and energy, so alive to all that concerns their temporal interests, are very unwilling to believe that they may be dead while they live; and that if they be not quickened into spiritual life, their end will be what the Apostle terms, "Death unto death."

In our text he declares the Ephesians, to whom he wrote, to have experienced both these states. Once they "were dead in trespasses and sins." Now Christ had quickened them into spiritual life. Of two similar classes does this whole world consist. The larger number are dead in trespasses and sins. Like these Ephesians before their conversion, as described by St. Paul in the verses following the text, they are "walking according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, who worketh in the children of disobedience;" "having their conversation in the lusts of the flesh;" and "fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind." The Apostle guards against the supposition, that this was a character peculiar to the Ephesians merely because engulfed in the darkness of heathenism, by attributing the same properties to himself and his associates in their unconverted state. He confesses they "were, by nature, children of wrath, even

as others." But, with humble gratitude he avers, that their situation was now very different: "God, says he, who is rich in mercy, for the great love wherewith he loved us, hath quickened us together with Christ."

The text may lead us to consider,

I. The state and character of the natural man as here described.

II. The agency by which he is rescued from spiritual death.

I. The state and character of the natural man. He is "dead in trespasses and sins." His condition has no fitter emblem than that of death. Similitudes, however, must never be strained so far as to lead into absurdities and contradictions. It would be carrying this allegation too far to make the natural death of the body, and the spiritual death of the soul identical. The body deprived of life is utterly incapable of action, just as if it had never been the tabernacle of that thinking principle we call the soul. But a soul dead in trespasses and sins is not exactly in that state. So far as regards the powers, sensations, and actions of our intellectual nature, it is perfectly alive. Its thoughts are exercised, and its sensibilities engaged, in earthly things with activity and energy. It can soar aloft into the regions of speculative knowledge. It can even avoid, in the exercise of its natural powers, much of moral evil, and practise much of seeming good. All that is exterior even in the offices and duties of religion, comes within its grasp. Nay, its faculties may be employed in the use of those means of grace which are designed to be the instruments of the soul's resurrection from the death of sin to the life of righteousness. It would be a perversion of a Scripture doctrine, not to regard man, at every period of his existence, as a rational creature, or to question his free will. For so God unquestionably regards him. He is at all times under the obligation of the duties prescribed to him by his Maker. He is subject to the law of God, with all its sanctions; and to him are addressed the promises, expostulations, and invitations of the Gospel. These concessions are necessary to set aside those excuses which human reluctance and indolence are continually presenting for the neglect of the soul's salvation, and to maintain the universal accountability of all men for the talents committed to their trust. And yet, in perfect consistency with these admissions, it is, nevertheless, true, that all unregenerate men are considered in God's word, as "dead in trespasses and sins." "Sin hath entered into the world, and death by sin, and so death, (spiritual as well as natural,) hath passed upon all men in that all have sinned." Let a survey of the world be taken with that purified vision which the sacred Scriptures and the Holy Spirit supply, and its fallen inhabitants present the aspect of such a valley of dry bones as was spread before the eyes of the prophet of the Lord. The scene presented is one wide carnival of death, over every region of the habitable globe, in every place of man's dwelling, from the cheerless hovel of poverty to the splendid mansion of luxury and wealth, and over every intellectual variety of our species, from him who scarcely seems raised in mental endowments above the beasts that perish, to him whose understanding has mastered all the heights of human science. One spiritual condition is the heritage of our race. "There is none that

doeth good, no not one." Every soul has been arraigned at the bar of divine justice ; the charge of universal guilt has been established ; and sentence of death passed upon every descendant of him who first violated the command of his Maker. By nature all are alienated from the love of God, and averse to holy principles of action ; and, therefore, in the sense intended by our Apostle, they are spiritually dead. For the purposes of self-gratification ; for the active pursuit of present enjoyment ; for the inordinate love of the things of time and sense, man has principles and faculties of action abundantly sufficient. Ingenuity in the contrivance of his plans, activity in their pursuit, perseverance in their accomplishment, all who are observant of the course of human action will admit to belong naturally to man. It is this very devotion to earthly things, associated with dislike to spiritual, that the terms of our text were intended to designate. When we speak of a man's being "dead in trespasses and sins, and so incapable of doing what is spiritually good, it is not physical nor intellectual, but moral incompetency we intend. It is like our speaking of a miser being incapable of a generous action. The evil lies in the perverted state of the will, or heart, which is the seat of guilt. It does not imply that the man could not do what is right, if he really had a desire for it. But he has no inclination for spiritual things. On the contrary, he has a deliberate and allowed aversion to what is agreeable to the will of God. He is dead to holy duties—has no relish for them. This is sinful, and brings him in guilty before God. And, surely, it does not diminish, far less take away his guilt, that such is its extent, that nothing less than divine power will ever overcome it. Unrenewed men are utterly opposed to the holy requirements of God's law ; and they willingly, and without constraint, reject the Gospel. The first is sufficient to seal their condemnation. The second raises their criminality into a still higher grade of atrocity. Having incurred an awful penalty, they ungratefully reject the declared and only means of its remission. They manifest no desire after an interest in the salvation which God has mercifully revealed. They have willingly brought upon themselves the guilt of transgression, and they are most criminally indifferent to the promises which divine mercy proposes for its removal. Is not this statement supported by Scripture authority and daily observation ? Surely an unbiased judgment must acknowledge its accordance with both. Men are called upon to love God with all their heart, and soul, and mind, and strength. They are conjured to abandon their pride, and self-indulgence, their love of the world, their reliance on their own righteousness, their opposition to the grace of the Gospel. There are set before them the love of God, as the legitimate and grand incentive to duty ; his law as the supreme rule of conduct, his glory as its proper end, and his mercy in Christ Jesus as the only hope of escaping the consequences of transgression. But alas, how ineffectually are these things pressed upon their attention ! All that promptitude and vigor of action, which are so readily called forth in the inferior concerns of life, are here wanting. Call we to such ever so loudly ; they answer not. Proclaim we the terrors of the Lord ; they still slumber and sleep amid the billows of divine wrath. Address we to them the affecting appeals

of God's mercy and compassion ; they have ears, but they hear not. Reiterate we the free forgiveness of the Gospel, and all the countless blessings God is ready, for Christ's sake, to bestow upon repentant sinners ; they refuse to stretch out the hand of faith to receive them. O how many have lived esteemed, and died lamented, and have had eulogies eloquent, perhaps just, pronounced upon their social virtues, whose minds have been strangers to the spirituality and holiness of God's law, whose conduct has not been subordinated to his commands, and whose hearts have never felt the quickenings of his grace, and so risen into that spiritual life which alone prepares for life eternal ! Never do they seem to realize the solemn truth, that the period of probation is wasted and the soul destroyed by any course that is pursued without reference to God and the salvation of his Son, and with no heart-felt reliance on that Almighty Spirit, who alone quickeneth the spiritually dead. And this appropriately introduces our

II. Second topic : namely, the agency by which alone, souls, dead in trespasses and sins, are rescued from that state. " You hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins."

It is Christ, through the eternal Spirit, who is the agent in this great work. The converted Ephesians had heard the voice of the Son of God, and lived : and that same Son of God has still a voice upon earth. He addresses men in his Gospel, which, under the influences of the Spirit, that gracious Comforter, whom, agreeably to his promise, he hath sent from the Father, is made the power of God unto their salvation. This is the appointed agency for calling man from darkness to light, from sin to holiness, from Satan to God, from spiritual death to spiritual life and peace. The doctrine of an incarnate Savior, honored not merely as a preacher of righteousness, but as an atoning sacrifice, applied by the Spirit in demonstration and power, is, indeed, to its believing recipient, as life from the dead. The sinner, by faith, of Jesus Christ, consenting to die, as a vicarious offering for sin, in our flesh, and in our behalf, with the incalculable weight of all our offences on his guiltless head ; and then rising from the dead, still bearing our nature in triumph from the grave, and elevating it to the throne of God in glory, where he ever lives as our prevailing intercessor, imparts, as it were, a new existence to the soul. In the cordial persuasion and acceptance of these wondrous truths, it revives from its dreadful torpor, and is animated with principles of spiritual life before unknown. No otherwise can any experience a resurrection from the death of sin, and a new birth to righteousness, or look forward with well grounded hope for the salvation of God. That blessed Gospel which proclaims these saving truths also shows man his depravity and helplessness. It indicates with unclouded clearness that he needs salvation from the dominion, as well as the penalty of sin ; but that, in neither respect, can he be a Savior to himself ; that he must place his entire dependence upon " the Lamb of God," to whom has been committed the work of redemption, and " who alone taketh away the sin of the world :" and it sets forth this divinely constituted Redeemer in all the freeness, extent, and fulness of his great salvation. It exhibits him as declaring, in these unmeasured terms, the ample sufficiency

of the means of its attainment, and as pledging his sacred word for its bestowment on every believer;—"I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live; and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die." And, as an incitement, at once to embrace the proffered blessing, it sounds in the ear of each slumbering mortal the stirring call, "Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light." Nor is this all. But, aware of man's desperate insensibility, and that, if left to himself, he would remain unprofited by all the invitations of the Gospel, the same Jesus sends a heavenly influence to awaken and impress the heart. Without this, the privileges, duties, and delights of spiritual life would still be unheeded and unknown. But Christ fulfils his promise, made before his ascension to the Father, in sending the Holy Spirit to "convince of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment." This sacred Agent accompanies the preaching of the word with his energetic inward operations. He removes the natural dulness of the ear, and softens the stony hardness of the heart. We remember the seer of old in the valley of vision. He saw at first only dry bones. But presently there was a noise and a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to his bone, and the sinews and the flesh came upon them, and the skin covered them from above. Yet there was no life in them. The spark of vitality remained to be enkindled. But, when the word was given, "Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live," immediately the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceeding great army." In like manner the Gospel is a dead letter, or it produces but a semblance of life, until the Holy Spirit visits, with his enlightening and animating beams, the souls to whom it is addressed. It is He who commands it to the awakened understanding and the anxious heart of the sinner in all its sufficiency for his salvation, and in all its fitness to his spiritual wants. After convincing him of sin, the Spirit takes of the things of Christ and shows them to him. He quickens the discernment, so as to enable the subject of his influences to see the beauty and excellence of the Gospel plan. He persuasively inclines, or more powerfully draws, his will into the choice of the better part. He renews the sinner's nature, and sanctifies his affections, so as to prepare him for an entire surrender to God of all his faculties and powers, and for a full engagement in all the duties of evangelical obedience. These things, in his natural state, he discerned not. They were, on the contrary, foolishness to him. Now he sees them in bright and undeviating colors, and his heart is enraptured with the view. O who, in the pride of his soul, would trust the blindness of the natural understanding, or the feeble light of unassisted reason, when offered such an enlightener and such a guide! Who would rest in his own inefficient efforts, when he may rely on this all-powerful Agent! Who would delay one moment to accept that aid, without which the Bible presents in vain its glorious truths, and the soul remains utterly unprepared for the bliss of heaven, and momentarily exposed to perdition? Shall we be told that there is discouragement in this view of man's required reliance on divine assistance in the work of salvation? We answer, No. It is the only sure

ground of consolation and hope. Without it there would be ground for neither. Though Christ, in the way now stated, is both "the author and finisher of our faith," he may be resorted to without hesitation or doubt as to his willingness to interpose the required agency in behalf of every sincere suppliant of his favor. His power is indicated in the declaration, "As the Father raiseth up the dead, and quickeneth them, so the Son quickeneth whom he will;" and the willingness of the former to co-operate in the work, is found in the assurance, that He will give the Holy Spirit to all that ask. There is, therefore, nothing dispiriting, but every thing encouraging, in relinquishing self-dependence, and coming at once to Jesus, "the way, the truth, and the life." Because he liveth, his believing people shall live also. Yes, he who stood at the grave of Lazarus, and at whose bidding the dead came forth in all the vigor of restored life; he who took the ruler's daughter by the hand, and raised her as from the bed of death; he at whose call the young man of Nain arose from the bier, restored to all his functions; he, in fine, who manifested the energies of omnipotence in "loosing himself from the bands of death, it not being possible that he should be holden of them," he surely has power to bestow grace and salvation, and will confer them on all who come in humble penitence and faith to receive them at his hands. Millions of contrite sinners, bowing beneath his cross, have been invested with these blessings, from that hour in which he breathed upon his apostles, and said unto them, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost," down to the favored day in which we live. Nor must it be questioned, that he is as ready now as ever to quicken into spiritual life the millions of our race now lying dead in trespasses and sins, to make them partakers of his own nature and blessedness, and to form himself within them the hope of future glory. He is exalted at the right hand of the Father for these very purposes, and his mediatorial reign will not terminate until, to an illustrious extent, they have been achieved. However many slight his mercy, and become self-destroyers, myriads of the dead in sin shall be quickened to spiritual life, delivered from the power of Satan, absolved from the sentence of condemnation, and received into those heavenly mansions which the Savior has prepared.

Our subject addresses itself with interest both to those who are still dead in trespasses and sins, and to those who, under the quickening influence of the Spirit, have risen into spiritual life.

1. We are bound, in faithfulness, to say to the former, that, in their present state, the sacred Scriptures bear toward them a most threatening, nay, a condemning aspect. So they did towards the quickened individuals addressed in our text in their antecedent state of spiritual death. But, as the blessing of God accompanied the labors of his servants in *their recovery to life*, so we are encouraged to hope for like effects on our ministry, in reference to the dead in sin. The promise is unrevoked: "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." Yes, in reliance on Him, without whose blessing we know that our preaching and your hearing are alike vain, we will hope, that, in another sense than that which looks forward to the final judgment, "the hour cometh, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son

of God, and live." O, make this hour your own, by listening to the Savior's call, breaking the chains of death in which you have been so long ingloriously holden, and coming forth from the grave of sin into the liberty of the sons of God. Let the time past suffice to have remained in degradation, darkness, inactivity, and death. The calls of mercy, so often unheard or disregarded, are still sounded in your ears; the gracious provisions still tendered to your acceptance. But while we repeat our solicitations to all who have hitherto turned a deaf ear to our message, we solemnly warn them of the danger of continued unbelief. We would inscribe, in characters that should be ever present to their view, that declaration of Christ himself: "He that believeth on the Son of God hath life, and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him." How awful the thought, that, when persevering obduracy shall have sealed you to the doom of the reprobate, that same benignant Savior who is now entreating you to turn and live, will cast upon you the everlasting reproach, "Ye would not come unto me that ye might have life." The voice of entreaty will then be changed to that of solemn adjudication; and the sentence of that dread tribunal annex to the spiritual death the consignment of body and soul to a second death, tremendous in wo, as eternal in duration. Do you vainly indulge a hope that the supplication, which the fearful prospect before you may extort, will, even at that late period, be favorably heard and answered? We do not hesitate to affirm, that no warrant for such a hope is to be found in the book of God. He who is now crying, "Turn ye at my reproof: behold, I will pour out my Spirit upon you; I will make known my words unto you," will then fulfil the prediction of his prophet, in the stern reply, "Because I have called, and ye refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded: but ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof; I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh; when your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind; when distress and anguish cometh upon you: then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall seek me early, but shall not find me." How astonishing that folly, which is willing to encounter peril such as this! Be it not yours, my hearers. Dismiss a spirit of procrastination, and seek now that transition from spiritual death to a renewed life of faith and holiness, which is the only safe precursor, as it is the assured pledge, of immortal glory.

2. We have said our subject addresses itself with interest also to those who, under the influence of the Spirit, have emerged from the death of sin into spiritual life.

Take care that you have the undoubted witness within yourselves of this most interesting, blessed fact. If God has enabled you to realize this happy change, you know it by its benign effects upon your dispositions and feelings; and by those fruits of righteousness which, if ye were not living trees of the Lord's planting, you could not possibly produce. If you are under no self-deception as to what God has wrought *for* you and *within* you, "maintain the beginning of your confidence steadfast unto the end." Be humble and unostentatious, meek and lowly, as your adored Master. But it is no vio-

lation of modesty that you make manifest to the world that you have passed from death to life, and that you are the ever improving disciples of Him to whom alone you are ready to ascribe the glorious change. Put forth, for the promotion of his glory, exertions corresponding with your renovated powers. Let your life be spent in their holy self-denying dedication to his service, that you may become every day more matured for the never ending life which is to follow. "If ye be indeed risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth at the right hand of God." Renewed and ransomed spirits! Break the fetters that bind you to earth. The tendency of the living principle within you is to heaven. Let your conversation be there. In affection and in privilege, in love and in duty, rise with your risen, glorified Redeemer. "Stretch your imaginations to the utmost. Raise your wishes higher and higher, while you live. Not a wish shall be disappointed. The gates of life are already unfolding to admit you." Anticipate, then, in holy hope, the joys that are to follow, "When Christ, who is your life shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory," and ye shall be like him; for ye shall see him as he is."

SERMON CCXV.

By JAMES MILNOR, D.D.

THE PARABLE OF THE TARES.

MATTHEW xiii. 24—30. *Another parable put he forth unto them, saying: The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field: but while men slept, the enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way. But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. So the servants of the household came unto him and said; Sir, didst thou not sow good seed in thy field? From whence then hath it tares? He said unto them, An enemy hath done this. The servants said unto him, Wilt thou, then, that we go and gather them up? But he said, Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. Let both grow together, until the harvest; and in the time of harvest, I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them; but gather the wheat into my barn.*

THERE is a rich variety of instruction in the parables delivered by our blessed Lord. That which we have now read affords a clear solution of a difficulty that has greatly perplexed the minds of many, and conveys a lesson calculated, if duly attended to, to avert much mischief from the church of God.

In order to derive the proper instruction from this interesting passage, I shall consider it first, generally, in reference to the world at large; se-

cordly; specially, in reference to the *Church of Christ*. And thirdly; close the subject with a brief application of the truths thus elicited.

I. Let us deduce from the parable such instruction as it affords in reference to the existence and continuance of moral evil in the world.

Whence has moral evil its origin? If there be a superintending and Almighty Providence, why is its continuance permitted? How happens it, that the earth is covered with violence and oppression; that wicked men are exalted to riches and honor, and the virtuous made the subjects of degradation and misery; that triumphant villainy so frequently exults in pride and power, while humble virtue is neither raised to prosperity, nor suffered to pursue her lowly path uninterrupted and in peace? Whence so strange an inequality in the states of men with respect to the comforts and enjoyments of life, and so manifest a pre-eminence of worldly prosperity, in many instances, granted to the unworthy and base?

These are difficulties urged by infidels against the providence of God, to confirm their own skepticism, and to unsettle the faith of others. They have also, at times, disquieted the minds of professors of religion; and much ineffectual labor has been expended for their solution. By both classes they have been exaggerated as to their nature and extent; by the former designedly, for the most malignant and mischievous purposes; by the latter unintentionally, from perverted or mistaken apprehensions; not unfrequently from a natural temperament of mind disposed to melancholy, or from an influence upon their judgments proceeding from their own particular allotment in the world.

That much evil, however, does exist, must be admitted; and although unbelieving philosophers may speculate about its origin, to the derogation of infinite wisdom and goodness, or perhaps to the utter denial of a supreme intelligence, still the humble Christian will resort, with satisfaction, to the only authentic source of information on the subject. His Bible unfolds the origin of all this evil. It proceeds from the sinful disobedience of man, and formed no part of the stupendous creation of God. All things were originally formed, by the great Creator, in a manner perfectly agreeing with his divine perfections.

Man, the noblest of his sublunary works, he endowed with an innocence and integrity of character, that, if retained, would have been a perpetual bar against those desolating miseries which have followed his transgression. The entire freedom of his will, and an uncorrupted and unclouded reason to assist his choice, were the original gift of his Creator. Under the influence of that enemy of his peace, the devil, mentioned by Christ in his explanation of this parable, he violated the commandment of God. The primary author of moral evil, therefore, is this great adversary of the human race. Yielding, voluntarily, to his machinations, our first parents introduced sin and all its ruinous consequences into the world, and from them a seed of evil-doers have, in all successive ages, "risen up in their fathers' stead." All the fanciful theories and vain systems, invented to account for the origin of the evil, can furnish no such satisfactory information on the point, as this sure word of God.

But still, admitting the truth of this account, it is not unusual to indulge a secret murmuring at the severity of God in connecting such terrible results with "the offence of one man." This is a subject of too great difficulty and extent to be entered into elaborately in this discourse. A few general reflections suggested by the parable may perhaps be useful.

Let me again repeat, that, great as is the acknowledged evil in the world, infidelity, misanthropy, and ignorance are prone to overestimate its comparative amount, and to overlook many alleviating circumstances, which more honest, unbiased, and lucid views will readily discover. Unequal as the conditions of men may appear at a transient glance, a closer view would often detect the fallacy of first impressions. The enlightened Psalmist acknowledges that he was, for a time, under the delusion of such a partial and imperfect apprehension of the ways of divine Providence. A view of the temporal prosperity of the wicked made him exclaim, "I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocence." David, however, soon learned to estimate with more justice and reverence the dispensations of Heaven. Instead of looking only at the surface of things, or adverting merely to their present state, "he went into the sanctuary of God, and understood their end." He confesses his former ignorance and foolishness, and no longer distrusts the wisdom, or the goodness of God. He saw in the ultimate issue that there was no reason for arraigning any attribute of the divine nature, because of a *temporary* allowance of the predominance of vice. He no doubt also ascertained that no inconsiderable portion of the outward prosperity of the wicked was unaccompanied even by *present* felicity. Not unfrequently, when God gives men all the desires of their hearts, he sends Jeanness and wretchedness into their souls.

Wealth is often accompanied by the gnawings of conscience, at the unhallowed means that have procured it; by a restless anxiety and apprehension for its safety, and by an insatiable thirst for augmenting still the useless horde. Worldly honor hangs in trembling suspense upon the varying breath of the multitude, is haunted by a jealous fear of opposing rivals, and, even when most fully secured, soon palls with satiety, and often ends in utter dissatisfaction and disgust. Pleasure and gayety not unfrequently play their fantastic and deceptive arts before the world, when, could their votary be followed to the retirement of his closet, he would be found to be the victim of remorse, or of sullenness and gloom.

Thus, true happiness is less dependent than most imagine upon outward circumstances. Often are a tranquillity of soul, and complacency of feeling, enjoyed by the poor and despised Christian, to which the abandoned libertine, the ardent seeker of worldly honor, and the miserly accumulator of riches, are utter strangers. Neither does it always happen that virtue is not ostensibly seen to be its own reward, and vice its own punisher, in the external events of this life. The possessions of the unprincipled are frequently torn from them by the most surprising and unexpected reverses. The temporary idol of popular adulation is outrun in the race of competition, or having attained his desired eminence, grows giddy, totters,

and falls into degradation and ruin. The silly follower of licentious pleasures finds in the loss of property and health, and the tormenting stings of a guilty conscience, the certain results of his short-lived gratifications. And offenders of a still more aggravated grade, while deriving from occasional success the most encouraging hopes of continued impunity, are arrested in their course, and made awfully responsible to the demands of retributive justice.

The history of the world supplies abundant illustration of these truths, in relation both to individual and to national crimes. How soon did the appointed punishment follow the transgression of our first parents! What instantaneous evidence of the justice of God overtook the first shedder of human blood! How awful and speedy the termination of the rebellious attempts of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, and their wicked adherents! How sudden and dreadful the fate of Ananias and Sapphira! The extinction of nearly the whole human race in a mighty deluge of waters; the raining of fire and brimstone upon Sodom and Gomorrah; the entombing in a watery grave of Pharaoh and his host; the extermination of the idolatrous Canaanites; the successive judgments upon the Israelites themselves for their rebellion and idolatry; and the present dispersed and degraded condition of that people; as well as numerous other events found in the annals of ancient and modern history, fully attest, that the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth, and will avenge with signal inflictions of his wrath the crimes both of individuals and of nations. Still, however, must we acknowledge, that, in numerous instances, the tares and the wheat are not only suffered to grow together, but the former are even permitted to choke and to destroy the latter. Why this is so, our finite faculties can never fully comprehend. Yet there are many considerations calculated to vindicate the ways of God to man. The text furnishes a very striking one, that of the danger likely to result from rooting up the tares;—the rooting up the wheat also. The fabric of human society is composed of many parts mutually dependent upon each other. Take away some of the materials which compose it, and you endanger its safety, solidity, and permanence. The world not only consists of the evil and the good, but, in the ramifications of the social state, they are often so connected, that the immediate punishment of the guilty would inevitably involve that of the innocent. This sometimes necessarily occurs in the adjudication of criminals to the punishments prescribed by the laws of human society. The innocent wife of a guilty husband, the helpless children of a wicked parent, share the punishment of crimes in which they have had no part. May not the goodness of God withhold in some cases the merited punishment from such a consideration as this? In others may not the long suffering of Almighty God be extended for the benefit of the offender himself; that time being afforded for repentance, he may "return unto the Lord, who will have mercy upon him, and to our God, who will abundantly pardon?" In others, again, may we not be mistaken as to the measure or degree of unpunished criminality? Outward conduct is, of necessity, the criterion of our decision. But we can lay no claim to infalli-

bility of judgment. Our decisions may be harsh or erroneous. We may be ignorant of many real palliations. We know not, even in instances of unquestionable error or crime, what Providence may have in store, either of mercy, or of judgment, for those who appear to us in the light of flagrant offenders against his laws. There are some particulars of daily observation, in which it is easy to discern how the providence of God produces good out of evil, and makes even the wrath of man to praise him, and benefit his creatures. If there were no victims of suffering, the requisite trials of human character could not be had. Where, in the absence of misfortune and of pain, would be the evidences of fidelity, of patience, and of fortitude? If the feelings of the heart were not excited by objects calling for the exercise of commiseration and relief, might not those virtues languish or become extinct in the breast? Activity in duty, humility of temper, submission to the divine will, and many other valuable properties of the mind, have been the product of vicissitudes of fortune, apparently the most discouraging and afflictive. Even the temporary triumphs of the wicked are often rods in the hands of an all-wise and affectionate Parent, whereby his children are aroused from sloth and inactivity. O how many can thankfully acknowledge, that their best instructions have been received in the school of adversity!

In short, while the existence of moral evil is a permanent and incontrovertible evidence of the wilful degeneracy of man, its direction to beneficial ends is equally decisive proof of the goodness of God. These, it is true, may at present be beyond the reach of our faculties; yet we may rest assured that "the Judge of the earth will do right." Without daring presumptuously to except against his moral government, let us look forward to that period to which our Savior has in this parable directed our attention, when "God will bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil;" when, the wise purposes of his providence having been answered, all mystery and darkness will be removed, and the final destiny of mortals be determined by a sentence which shall receive the plaudits of an assembled universe.—"Indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish upon every soul of man that doeth evil; but glory, honor, and peace to every man that worketh good."

II. But although the instruction to be derived from a due consideration of this parable may have the latitude already assigned it, in reference to the world generally, it was probably designed to apply more especially to the Church of God.

Christ could not have intended, surely, that his Church should be defiled and discredited by retaining in her communion openly profligate and dissolute offenders. Such "children of the wicked one" as should presumptuously associate themselves with his people, and yet manifest themselves to be "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel" by profligacy and vice, it never could have been meant to tolerate within the bosom of his holy Church. The readiness with which such characters may be distinguished, would prevent all injurious mistakes, and their separation could be attended with no danger to the general body. On the contrary, the eradication of the most

noxious weeds from the neighborhood of useful plants cannot be more beneficial than the immediate excision from the communion of the Church of men of scandalous lives and conversation. But while the parable was not intended to prohibit such a salutary course of discipline as this, it is highly instructive in relation to the *extent* to which it may be carried. What intolerance and oppression have arisen from the abuse of ecclesiastical power! How many officious servants of the sanctuary, having fixed a standard of orthodoxy and practice according to their own peculiar views, have become the persecutors of others as sound as themselves in material points of doctrine, and as exemplary in the discharge of all the duties of life. Now the lesson taught by this parable is utterly hostile to such a course of conduct. It reminds us that in the Church of God on earth, "the evil are ever mingled with the good." Nominal Christians, hypocritical professors, specious pretenders to religion, are probably blended with the truly pious and sincere in every Christian society. This parable contains a manifest prophecy of the great Head of the Church, that such will continue to be the case to the end of time. The evil can never be entirely prevented. Wherever, therefore, fundamental error of doctrine is not propagated, or the cause of religion disgraced by a vicious course of life, any thing like severity of discipline is unbecoming and dangerous. A zeal well intended may produce the most mischievous effects.

Men may give but unsatisfactory evidences of piety, and exhibit but few of the graces of the Christian character, and on these points they may justly become the subjects of public or private admonition; and yet it may happen that in many instances of this sort, if we possessed a clearer insight into character, we should find much real goodness under an unpromising exterior. The same discernment might enable us to detect in others much secret vice, much unholy feeling, under apparently the most unblamable, nay the most attractive and admired course of external conduct. But it was never intended by Divine Providence to commit to fallible men a power which is from its very nature exclusively his own; and therefore their faculties, in the highest state of cultivation and improvement, are left incompetent to its safe and proper exercise. It is not permitted to root up the tares, lest, either through malice or mistake, the wheat be rooted up also.

A variety of causes may have restrained the Church from the exercise of severe discipline in cases where the interests of religion seemed to require it. In many of these cases, however, if the whole ground were surveyed, the complaint would vanish. But though it be just, imperfection in the administration of the system can be no objection to the system itself, which, even as established by the Savior, recognizes within the pale of the Christian communion the necessary toleration of some unworthy, nominal, hypocritical professors.

As this parable teaches a most instructive and imperative lesson of forbearance and moderation in the ministers of Christ, so it is calculated to correct a very improper course of sentiment in the private members of his Church. It is not unusual for Christians, actuated in some instances, it is hoped, by a holy zeal, but in others, it is feared, by a spirit of censoriousness, to sit in

judgment upon their brethren, and pronounce very unauthorized denunciations upon their characters and conduct. Such a practice has the unqualified disapprobation of our Savior in many parts of his invaluable instructions, and is obviously opposed to the principle of this parable, which apprises us of the great danger of assuming a province that is not ours, but belongs to Him who "will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and make manifest the counsels of the heart." To persons of the dispositions mentioned, we would address expostulations such as the Apostle did to some of a like character in his day. "Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? To his own Master he standeth or falleth. But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at naught thy brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ."

Equally opposed to the spirit of this parable, is that unhappy error of Christian professors, which leads them to separate from the communion of a religious society, because it tolerates, in their apprehension, some unworthy professors. Let such beware, lest the standard of duty which they have formed be not exactly that which the Holy Scriptures furnish. Let them reflect whether, in reference to the characters objected to, it be not at least possible that their judgment may be biased or erroneous. And above all, let them be cautious, lest, by their unyielding and uncharitable conduct, they arraign the wisdom and goodness of God, who, no doubt for the wisest purposes, has apprised us, in the text, that the wheat and the tares, the righteous and the wicked, are to grow together, until, in the great harvest of the judgment day, *He makes the awful separation.*

Our Savior closed his explanation of this parable, by emphatically exclaiming, "Who hath ears to hear, let him hear." In the brief improvement with which we propose to conclude, let us also call on several descriptions of persons to hear the profitable instruction it affords.

1. Let vain speculators and philosophers hear. After all their attainments in human knowledge, how limited is their comprehension of the ways of God; how far beyond their reach the immense and complicated system by which his universe is governed. Let them not be hasty in condemning the arrangements of divine Providence, with the vast machinery and ultimate objects of which they are so little acquainted. Let them avoid presumptuous and rash speculations. Instead of daring to censure, let them silently acquiesce in events, which, though incomprehensible to them, they may be assured have originated in wisdom, are conducted in the most fit and proper manner, and will terminate in the happiest results.

In the final close of this terrestrial scene, and the full development of the ways of Providence, how mean and contemptible will all the vain objections of men appear! But until that period, "the Most High worketh all things after the counsel of his own will, and giveth not account of any of his matters."

2. Let self-deceivers hear. Let them not imagine that their being ranked in outward profession with "the children of the kingdom," constitutes them

of the happy number. Let them examine themselves as to the grounds of their religion. "Try your own selves, prove your own selves, whether ye be in the faith." They are perhaps trusting, as evidence of their religion, to transient feelings, or a punctilio attention to outward rites. Let them not build the superstructure of their hopes on such sandy foundations as these. Instead of fitful, inflamed affections, let them cultivate settled *habits* of piety. When availing themselves of the useful adjuncts of piety, religious rituals, let them recollect that there is "a form of godliness without the power," and that they may possess "a name to live, whilst they are dead." In that day when He "whose fan is in his hand shall thoroughly purge his floor, he will gather his wheat only into the garner, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." God "requires truth in the inward parts." Although hypocrites may now mingle in communion with the truly pious and sincere, "the Lord knoweth their hearts;" and what will be "their hope when God taketh away their souls?"

3. Let the righteous hear. Let them not be offended, nor fret themselves, at the unavoidable mixture of good and bad in the church of Christ. It is a departure from the character that ought to distinguish his disciples, to indulge repining murmurs at what he has predicted as an accompaniment of his church to the end of the world; and it is a violation of his precepts, invincibly to judge the character of their brethren. James and John were once so inconsiderately jealous as to ask permission to call down fire from heaven to consume the Samaritans, who refused to receive their Master. But "he rebuked them, and said, Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of." Let us "judge nothing before the time." Without presumptuously deciding upon the claims of others, let us strive "to approve ourselves to God." And even where the flagrancy of vice compels us to censure, let us not transform the just condemnation of sin into a personal hatred of the sinner. Whilst God withholds his judgments, forbearance on our part is an obvious duty. The solemn day of separation is not far distant. Until it arrives, let admonition and kind persuasion supply the place of vengeance. In the natural world there can be no transmutation of tares into wheat; but in the kingdom of grace a change impossible in nature is readily effected. Many of those who are already gathered into the granary of heaven; many of those who are now ripening for that glorious harvest that awaits them, were once noxious, unproductive tares or pestilential weeds. Christian charity, which "hopeth all things," should encourage the belief, that many nominal professors, and profligate offenders, whose hypocrisy or wickedness we now lament, may, by that "God who is rich in mercy," yet be "quickened in Christ, and made to sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus."

Finally ;—let all who are now present, hear.

The great harvest announced in this parable involves the gathering in, or the eternal rejection, of the whole human race. The division will be but into two classes. Whether these be designated by the terms, wheat and chaff, wheat and tares, sheep and goats, wise and foolish virgins, persons clothed with, or destitute of, the wedding garment, there are but two classes. In

that awful "day which shall burn as an oven," his appointed ministers, the "holy angels," will discern with unerring sagacity between them. "The righteous will then shine forth like the sun in the kingdom of their Father, whilst they that have done iniquity shall be cast into a furnace of fire, where shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth." May God, of his infinite mercy, grant us a portion with the righteous in that day, for Christ's sake. AMEN.

MANNER OF READING.

"The author is impressed with the fact, that, in the manner of *reading*, and especially of reading Sermons, there is generally exhibited a most shameful and criminal deficiency. If he might be allowed a suggestion on this point, he would say with deference, let the parent, or some one selected by him, read *aloud* for the benefit of the family, after preparing himself to read with due *emphasis* and *feeling*. And as a general rule, read aloud, even when alone—remembering that impressions made at once on the ear and eye, reach the heart with double force. Let this course be prayerfully adopted, and well written sermons and essays, and the precious Bible itself, would not so often be regarded as dull compositions; but their perusal would be accompanied with power from on high."—*Preface to Clark's Works.*

THE FINAL SETTLEMENT.

"How soon, my brethren, will the amazing realities of Judgment and Eternity break upon our unearthly vision, and fill us either with ecstacy or despair! I cast my thoughts forward but a little, and behold, the dead are rising, the elements melting, saints rejoicing, devils trembling. The Judge appears upon his great white throne—In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, we are before the judgment seat, with our respective flocks. The faithful and the unfaithful shepherds of every age are there. The trial proceeds, the books are closed, the final sentence is pronounced. The heavens are opened, and the pit yawns—the eternal song and the eternal wail are both begun. O may we then rise, with a great multitude saved through our unworthy instrumentality, to shine with them, as the brightness of the firmament—as the stars forever and ever."—*President Humphrey.*